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ABSTRACT

The first statement in this testimony points out the need for groups to define "violence" before taking any action against violent television programs, since violence means different things to different people. Many of the studies on violence use a narrow and simplistic definition of violence which does not take into account the effects of violence on different individuals. For example, programs which portray emotional violence, rather than physical violence, have been found to be very upsetting to adolescents. Through discussing concepts of violence in home, school, and community, we can provide ourselves with a broader base for making decisions about our personal selection of programs, and we can encourage each other to communicate with local television stations, networks, and producers about broadcasts both good and bad. The second statement deals with ways in which parents can mediate the effects of television violence on their children. Parents can discuss with their children the television shows they watch, using them as starting points for discussions of moral and social issues. They can discuss the violence in television shows in an abstract way, in order to demystify violent shows and to help children become aware of the barrage of violence to which they are exposed. (GW)

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TESTIMONY by

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Co-chairpersons, National Television Commission,
Journalism Education Association

at
The National Congress of Parents and Teachers
National Hearing on Television Violence
Chicago, Illinois
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Background on
Ann Christine Heintz and Elizabeth Conley:

Team teachers in The Odyssey Project, a two-year research project funded by the Ford Foundation, testing the value of prime time television in the high school classroom to develop vocabulary and facilitate sharing between teens and adults.

Co-authors, ME AND MY TV, a book narrating the two-year Odyssey experience and the research results. (Journalism Education Association, Shabbona, IL 60550, 1976)

Co-authors, MASS MEDIA, a high school text in the study of popular media and its impact on a free society. (Loyola University Press, Chicago, 60657, 1972, 1976)

STATEMENT
by Ann Christine Heintz, BVM

Several weeks ago, I learned that the Corporate Responsibility Committee of my congregation of religious women would review our stocks in terms of commercial sponsorship of violent television programs. I asked them to carry the job one step further and define "violence" before they took any action. I would ask the Congress of Parents and Teachers to do the same.

I have been teaching adolescents for twenty years. I can reaffirm the psychologists' position that duplicity, ambiguity and hypocrisy are serious problems for the teenager, causing insecurity and ultimate alienation from the adult world. As an adult working with teens, I am not about to give absolute meaning to a word that my experience tells me has many connotative associations for different people. I'm not about to preach an absolute norm of conduct that I cannot consistently model myself, and even as I establish my own norm, I feel responsible to encourage openess and understanding about the "other."

In these terms, consider with me today's adolescents. Since they have been seven or eight years old, the news media of this country and the public forums of this country--often epitomized in their own living rooms--have defined violence as follows:

Violence is resisting a national war policy.

Violence is participating in an immoral war.

Violence is disrespect for home and public officials.

Violence is vigilantes and child abuse and Watergate.

Violence is rape and insensitivity to woman's vulnerable position as child-bearer.

Violence is abortion.

Violence is capital punishment.

Violence is wanton, unpunished crime.

The opposite viewpoints in these four examples are quite sensitive positions developed by their advocates in very rational terms. Clearly

"violence" is a very connotative term. The word, the concept needs to be discussed with the adolescent as behavior that means different things to different people. It needs to be discussed by us adults that way. Accepting the grayness of the word is not ambiguity; it's realism.

My trouble with many of the studies on violence is the fact that the criterion (when the criterion is explained) is very narrow. Usually the criterion appers to be a visual one--a visual enactment of violent behavior on the screen--and rarely a conceptual one. For example, the drama "Sybil" included explicit torture scenes of a mother abusing her child, but the total drama was a conceptual message about latent hatred of a child towards its mother. Should the producer be faulted for including the explicit visual abuse? Since the producer could not be faulted for the portrayal of the concept since it was inherent to the story, should the network programmer be faulted for choosing and broadcasting such a story on a broadcast medium? I don't think that the current studies take us any closer to the answers because the norms have been too simplistic.

Consider two studies in 1976. The National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting study named as its ten most violent shows seven cop shows along with "Quest," "The Six Million Dollar Man," and "Baa Baa Black Sheep." On the other hand, The American Council for Better Broadcasts, representing opinions of 3,211 people in 25 states, found "Maude" to be the most disliked show with a -519. One teen in that study remarked about "Maude," that "the whole show centers around hurting people. I get a hateful feeling." Only three cop shows received negative ratings: "Cannon" (-117), "Hawaii 5-O" (-49) and "Kojak" (-11).

The NCCB study made no mention of "Sybil." Is that because violence is more justified in the context of serious drama than it is in weekly cop shows? No mention was made of two major network documentaries on guns which were rife with shooting scenes and blood. Is that because explicit violence is more permissible in the context of serious reporting than a made-for-TV movie?

These are heavy questions. We know that the nation will not achieve consensus on the answers any more than the nation has

achieved consensus on capital punishment or abortion. But it is very healthy to discuss these questions as a family, as a learning group (age ten and up) and as community groups because we raise our consciousness about human behavior and we become more sensitive to the effects of media messages on different individuals.

For example, I was amazed to discover that the NBC documentary on Guns in America by Lucy Jarvis, which Lucy intended as a deterent to the marketing of guns, actually motivated the students in my class to acquire guns and to learn how to shoot them. Last year, I used an episode of "Baretta" as a lead-in to the study of "MacBeth," and I found that students saw greater honor in Baretta, who overcame his vengeful attitude toward a murderer, than in Macduff, whose use of authority was vengeful to the end.

If we discuss these questions in the home and the community, we provide ourselves with a broader base for making decisions about our personal selection of programs. As individuals in these grass roots groups, we can encourage one another to communicate with the local TV stations, with networks and with producers about broadcasts both good and bad. But most of all, we can use the literature of television, which we all share, as the common denominator that allows us to share our lives with one another and to form our attitudes more responsibly.

The programs themselves should live or die with the ratings. Programs with no redeeming qualities ought to die a natural death of ratings. When they do not, then the discussions can turn inward on our own conduct versus our words. For example, the NCCB study rated "Starsky and Hutch" the second most violent program on television while the "People's Choice Awards" on CBS, February 10, will name "Starsky and Hutch" the nation's second favorite dramatic show based on independent research by Chilton Research Services and National Family Opinon. As adult viewers, let's admit the uncomfortable inconsistency of these two studies without pretending that it is certain that "Starsky and Hutch" is unhealthy, violent viewing or that its popularity in the nation's homes is due to sick viewing habits. That may be true, but until the private research group employed by NCCB gives us much more accountable research, such a condemning projection of the nation's tastes is not likely to motivate the individual viewer or the industry to change.

When groups such as the PTA or the AMA or the Commission on Television of the Journalism Education Association, which I represent, choose to denounce a program and try to intimidate its sponsors or its network originator, I believe that we must be very clear and very detailed in our reasons with regard to content, context, timing, specific audiences, and potential consequences. For example, those of us who worked on the research in the Odyssey Project with teens and adults in the same classroom for two years, are inclined towards the findings of the American Council for Better Broadcasting. We found programs like "Maude," where no character in the series intervened to bring integrity and sensitivity to family conflict, to be upsetting models of adult behavior and antithetical to adolescent groups. The teens have largely tuned out the Finleys on their own so there seems little need for me or our group to crusade against this program, but we did use our book to call this data to public attention, especially to the parents of teens who may be insensitive to emotional violence in their own homes.

I am not defending networks nor popular media producers for their program choices, but for the sake of the adolescent constituency I serve and for the sake of productive citizens' dialogue, I am anxious to end blanket denunciations and the "Ten Most Violent" lists. I am anxious to see a unified national plan of responsible research on the role of television in the lives of the young such as the one proposed in November, 1975 by 85 of the nation's leading media specialists in a conference sponsored by the Ford Foundation, the Markle Foundation and the National Science Foundation. The conference report, Television and Children, called for a unified approach and offered some promise of innovative study with broader objectives than the causes of violence and the effect of advertising on young consumers. I am anxious to see such a unified plan endorsed and funded so that all concerned citizens can make use of the findings to evaluate their own position and justify strategies for change that the finding might suggest.

I want to congratulate the Congress of Parents and Teachers for its responsible citizenship in holding these hearings. I only hope that it leads to greater awareness of the complexities of the issues, including the positive potential of popular programs in the home and the school.

Elizabeth Conley will address that potential in her statement based on the findings of our two-year study at St. Mary Center for Learning with the assistance of a Ford Foundation grant.

STATEMENT
by Elizabeth Conley

Parents Can Mediate the Effects of Television Violence

Television is usually watched in the home. One can look at that as an invasion of the privacy of the home, an unwanted presence into the heart of the family that is slowly taking over the teaching and socializing roles of the parents. Or, one can see this fact as a way to keep television under some sort of parental control. We can regulate the shows to be seen, can turn off the set at any given moment in a program, can lock it away in a closet, or can refuse to own one at all. The last is a drastic but extremely effective way of insuring that no television violence will affect our children. Yet, I assume that parents who are concerned enough to spend their time adn energy working with the issue of violence and television see far too many good points in television to exclude it from their homes. So what is to be done?

First, I think we have to realize that television is a money making business. The shows that are on the air are there because the audience watches them. When the ratings for a show go down and stay down, the show goes off the air. If there are so many scences of violence on the air, what is that saying about the people who are watching it? Do we have an insatiable need or appetite for such violence? Is it those "others" who watch violent shows while we sit back and watch the Boston Pops? Is television merely reflecting what is happening to our national character rather than having any causal relationship to it? Should we try to change ourselves? Would that mean trying to change human nature? I'm not sure. What I do know is that attempts thus far to curb some of the violence on television have resulted in even less satisfying fare. The family hour was a sham and satisfied no one. I would like to look at the problem from another angle. What can parents do right now with the shows that are currently viewed in their hoems?

They can talk about the shows. I used popular television intensively with teens in the last two years. I found that it makes a great deal of difference to take a TV show seriously enough to discuss it in an orderly fashion. The teens I taught were eager to get into discussions about shows that they watched. It was one area where they had experience and where their information was as valid as my own. More to the point, they enjoyed talking about the characters, the plots, the possible outcomes, and the ways that the issues raised were related to their own lives. Because television comes into the home, these characters are familar friends. They are common ground to all of us and can be the basis for a good conversation. They are usually a little more interesting and revealing a topic than the weather.

I think that using TV shows as starting points can be an invaluable way for parents and children to come to know each other well. It is a way for parents to see how their children are developing their concepts. It is a way for both to have more understanding. And as televsion shows become more explicit and more realistic about subject matter that is pertinent to our lives, but very sensitive, such as premarital sex, divorce, loneliness, they offer a much more open avenue to talk about such sensitive subjects in the home.

In dealing specifically with the issue of violence, I found the most effective way for me was to demystify the shows. Programs that rely on violence to carry them have little else. Like most serials they are the same week after week. Play a game and figure out the basic plot. You'll find that you can outline the few plots offered in the show and fit all the rest into these few. It soon makes the show itself uninteresting since there is little intriguing dialogue, surprise action or depth of character to make the show unique. When it's no longer fun, it no longer is of any interest.

One can use this kind of approach to look at the violence in the shows in an abstract way. It cools down the violence to have discussions about the need for violence in the script, whether or not there is motivation for it, is this gratuitous, is it realistic and so on. Discussions such as these in the home, in which parents and children become partners in search of truth, can be useful on many levels. It is a chance to talk together and show respect for one another's positions. It's a way of building trust. It's the best

way I can think of to help children become aware and conscious of the barrage of violence to which they are exposed. With that consciousness comes a chance for deeper understanding.